

The ANNC

With Union, organisations of all types which had existed separately in each colony commenced to amalgamate on a country-wide scale. The Africans were no exception.

All the Colonial Congresses, Vigilance Associations and the like, were summoned to a meeting called by P. Ka Isaka Seme at Bloemfontein

The South African Native National Congress was formed there on January 8, 1912.

A list of 21 "objects" was drawn up, including the following:

"To encourage mutual understanding and to bring together into common action as one political people all tribes and clans of various tribes or races and by means of combined effort and united political organisation to defend their freedom, rights and privileges;

"To educate Parliament and Provincial Councils, Municipalities, other bodies and the public generally regarding the requirements and aspirations of the Native people" and to enlist the sympathy and support of Europeans.

"To educate Bantu people on their rights, duties and obligations to the state and to themselves and to promote mutual help.

"To record all grievances and wants of the Native people and to seek by constitutional means the redress thereof . . ."

"To agitate and advocate by just means for the removal of the "Colour Bar" in political, educational and industrial fields and for equitable representation of Natives in Parliament or in those bodies that are vested with legislative powers or in those charged with the duty of administering matters affecting the Coloured races.

"To be the medium of representative opinion and to formulate a standard policy on Native Affairs for the benefit and guidance of the Union Government and Parliament:

"To discourage and contend against racialism and tribal feuds or to secure the elimination of racialism and tribal feuds, jealousy and petty quarrels by economic combination, education, goodwill and by other means;

"To establish or to assist the establishment of National Colleges or Public Institutions free from denominationalism or state control;

"To encourage inculcation and practices of habits of industry, thrift and cleanliness among the people and to propagate the gospel of the dignity of labour."

Although the Congress in its early days did not yet boldly advance the central demand for equality which has become the hall-mark of the movement now, it was a long step forward in the

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conditions of the time.

At the time when Congress was formed its leaders did not and could not have in mind the modern type of liberation movement, based upon a mass membership of workers and peasants, organised in a network of local branches which ceaselessly lead the people into political action, around their immediate needs and interests, as they do today.

Political and national consciousness had hardly penetrated to the mass of the people. The urban African population was relatively small, unsettled and transient. Tribal life and institutions were far more of a reality and an influence than they are today, after half a century of swift capitalist development in the Union.

Role of Chiefs

In fact, Congress could not have come into being at that time without the support and blessing of the Chiefs.

The Chiefs played a large part in the ANC in its early years. In fact, Seme, who was himself a protege of the Swazi Chief Sobuza II, credits the Chiefs with having been the real initiators of Congress. "Although I have the honour to have been the convenor of the Conference," he wrote, "yet it was the Chiefs, Maama, Seiso, Molema, Sekukuni and others who came to the nations' call to Bloemfontein that day who really dedicated this Congress." (Seme and other Congress leaders of this period frequently speak of the tribes as "nations").

The dream which Moshoeshoe had cherished fifty years before, of a great alliance of African peoples to resist their separate conquest was at last coming into being. But though the chiefs supported Congress in the hope of furthering their own class aims, they were not and could not have been the initiators and moving spirits. Already the vitality and social function of the tribal system was beginning to crumble. The chiefs were becoming less and less the independent leaders and democratic spokesmen of their peoples; the government was gradually moving towards making them its obedient agents and civil servants, liable to instant dismissal for disobedience. Hence it was that the dream of Moshoeshoe was furthered not by Chiefs, as independent rulers, but by a new class - the class of intellectual leaders and professional men who everywhere in the world have played such a vital part in the early stages of national liberation movements.

John L. Dube, leader of the Natal Native Congress was elected president and Sol T. Plaatje was first general secretary. The Vice-Presidents were Dr. W.B. Rubusana, Meshach Pelem, A. Mangena and S.M. Makgatho, leader of the Transvaal Native Congress.

Who were these men?

SEME: A lawyer, was like Gandhi and Abdurahman, a graduate of a British university. Born in Natal he began his legal practice in Johannesburg in 1910. He was legal adviser to the Swazi people.

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PLAATJE: Born at Boshof and educated at a mission school he became a court interpreter and newspaper editor. He was on the first ANC delegation to Britain in 1913 and wrote a book on the visit, 'Native Life in South Africa,' the first of the very, very few political histories by South African Africans. He was also a writer of literary and poetical works.

DUBE: Founder of Ilange Lase Natal in 1906, he was a Methodist parson

RUBUSANA: Later to be the first and only African ever elected to a South African Provincial Council, an Honorary Ph.D. of McKinley University and the first moderator to be appointed by the Congregational Union of South Africa.

PELEM: Was a teacher, later an interpreter, and then a recruiter of African labour for the railways.

MAKGATHO: Son of a chief, he was educated in England and became a teacher at Kilnerton. A large landowner, he was president of the Transvaal African Union from 1906 and later of the Transvaal Native Congress.

A. MANGENA: The first African to qualify as an advocate, he practised as an attorney in Johannesburg.

The structure of Congress at the beginning, reflected this alliance between middle-class intellectuals and Chiefs. The Constitution was modelled to a considerable extent on American, and especially on British, parliamentary institutions and procedures. Congress was divided into a Lower and an Upper House. Paramount Chief Letsie II of Basutoland was unanimously elected governor of the Upper House - the House of Chiefs, who held their positions for life. There was a speaker, a sergeant-at-arms, and a chaplain.

Loyalty

Congress statements were full of eulogies to the British king and pledges of loyalty and devotion. They stressed that it was the chiefs and their loyal African subjects who were the true servants of imperialism, while the Boers, in whom so much faith was placed by the Crown, were potential traitors.

Nor did Congress have any of the class consciousness manifested so clearly in the APO. One of the very first ANC-sponsored conferences, that at Kimberley in July 1913 - the time of a particularly bloody strike by white miners - adopted a resolution "that the Natives dissociated themselves entirely from the industrial struggles on the Witwatersrand and elsewhere and preferred to seek redress for their grievances through constitutional rather than by violent means."

Can this be read as a criticism of the Congress of that period? Of course not. For Congress in its early years was a creature of its environment and it was similar to other early national movements born under comparable conditions.

The early policy statements, for example, of the leaders of the

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Indian National Congress in India were in many cases identical almost word for word with those of the ANC. Said R.C. Dutt, Indian Congress President in 1901: "The people of India are not fond of sudden changes and revolutions. They desire to strengthen the present government, and to bring it more in touch with the people." And an earlier president had declared "The educated classes are the friends and not the foes of England - the natural and necessary allies in the great work that lies before her."

Similarly too, early government policy both in India and South Africa was not to discourage the Congresses but to treat them as a safety valve and to patronise them.

Does this mean that the ANC was, in its early years, a reactionary force? On the contrary, the ANC represented the most progressive politically organised force among the African people and its nature was determined by the fact that the African working class was still comparatively small and completely unorganised.

In later years, as the power of the chiefs declined and that of the lawyers, doctors, traders, priests, and clerks - whose outlook corresponds with that of the class known in Europe as the 'petit-bourgeoisie' - grew, Congress became militant, developing into a typical example of a 'bourgeois-national' organisation, its attention being focussed on the struggle to establish a place for the African small businessman in the economy.

These words of Seme's, before the ANC's 20th Annual Conference, put the Congress philosophy at that period in a nutshell: "Most of the failures which the Africans have met in business so far have been largely due to the fact that Native businessmen do not and cannot count upon any steady support from our own people. . . Through this Congress we can and should create our own markets and enough employment for our sons and daughters . . . Let us through this Congress come together and ask the government to give us land wherein we may develop ourselves."

(During and after the Second World War - as the African working class became a great force and began to make its weight felt, the Congress again moved forward, becoming the militant, principled body we know today.)

Step Forward

Jabavu played no part in the foundation conference of the ANC, and he and Imvo fulminated on the "Northern Native Extremists" who endangered "the political freedom we have long enjoyed" in the Cape.

The purpose of Union, as we have seen was partly in order to enable the state to drive the Africans off their land into the cities, and the means of doing this - the Land Act of 1913 - was announced almost immediately after Union.

The fight against the Land Act was the ANC's first fight.

It decided to send a deputation to Britain to plead against the

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Act. Futile as the deputation itself was, the collection of the money at mass meetings all over the country and in intensive propaganda done, served to arouse the political consciousness of the people.

The reactionaries did everything possible to hamper the campaign. Sneered Jabavu's Imvo: "A 'Native Congress' of busybodies in other people's affairs . . . talk such twaddle . . . they must take the Imperial Government for a pack of simpletons to grant interviews on such supremely laughable errands." The government banned a number of ANC meetings called to discuss the appeal to Britain.

APO and ANC

The APO had welcomed the formation of the ANC with the greatest warmth, and the two organisations were firm allies. An attack by Jabavu on Abdurahman in 1913 drew from Saul Msane, one of the most militant Congress leaders of the period, this scathing reply: "In your career of political sycophancy and legerdemain you have at length involved yourself in such a position that you do not dare to come out openly and stoutly in defence of your own countrymen. . . Unlike Dr. Abdurahman you evidently fear to be called a red-tied agitator. We want no contemptible cowards in this crisis."

The ANC deputation against the Land Act duly set sail for Britain and were rebuffed.

South Africa, like the rest of the British Empire, immediately joined Britain in the war; Botha and Smuts invaded South-West Africa (Namibia, then a German colony) and South African troops were sent to fight in Europe.

The ANC, like the APO and the Indian Congress, unhesitatingly decided to support the war effort, in the hope that Britain would recognise their loyalty and take steps to improve the position of their people. These hopes were bitterly disappointed. All that happened was that the Congress organisations ceased their agitation and lost ground during the war years. It was a setback from which the APO, in particular, never recovered.

But the war served as the impetus for the development of a new force in South African politics: the International Socialist League, later to become the Communist Party of South Africa, which was to break with the sterile colour-bar policies of the Labour Party and to make an invaluable contribution to the national liberation movement of the oppressed people of the country.

{ Enter the Socialists

Militant working-class ideas, and rudimentary socialist ones had already begun to make their appearance in South Africa in the 1890's, but many years were to pass before any names were to stand out bold for their contribution to the liberation movement.

The reason for this is obvious. Conditions in South Africa were

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such that no indigenous socialist movement was yet conceivable, and the early socialist movements were not made up of South African socialists but of men who were already socialists when they came to South Africa and whose political understanding had been formed in a society completely different from that here.

In addition the workers who emigrated from Britain to South Africa did not as a rule come from the settled workers, the most advanced of the the trade unionists, but from the adventurous spirits and fierce individualists who hoped to make their fortunes abroad.

It was in Cape Town immediately after the Anglo-Boer war that the socialist movement began to emerge.

In May 1904, from the foot of the Van Riebeeck statue in Adderley Street, Cape Town, Wilfred Harrison (later to be a foundation member of the Communist Party) announced to the world the aims of South Africa's first significant socialist body, the Social Democratic Federation:

"The abolition of Capitalism and Landlordism, the socialisation of all means of production, distribution and exchange, that is, the ownership and control of all the means by the people for the people."

Cape Socialists

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A little later the S.D.F. established its headquarters on the second floor of Chames Buildings, 6 Barrack Street, Cape Town. South Africa's first socialist newspaper, the Cape Socialist was issued in 1904 (from the same office as New Age is today)

A terrible depression had followed the Anglo-Boer War, and the militant policies of the S.D.F. were gaining support. The Federation staged a number of unemployment demonstrations. A photograph of a 13-man S.D.F. and trade union deputation to Parliament shows that one of its members was as Coloured leader, John Tobin, who later became a shameless renegade.

It was at the height of this campaign in 1906 that, for the first time, South African Socialists found themselves jailed for their beliefs.

"Cape Socialist" editor, A. Needham, and N.B. Levinson, a Committee member, were charged with incitement and held without bail.

Defence Funds were set up in Durban and Johannesburg where, the S.D.F. minutes record condescendingly, "there were a good number of soialists, but no aggressive public propaganda work was being done." Even the mayor of Cape Town contributed #2.2.0 to the Defence Fund, and with the triumphant acquittal of the accused the S.D.F. found popularity greater than ever. A steady flow of recruits was drawn in.

By 1906 the Socialists were holding meetings using no fewer than four languages: "Dutch, Malay, Kaffir and English," and Coloured

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socialists were taking part in Committee discussion.

The APO and the Socialists were on the friendliest terms, not only in Cape Town but also in Kimberley, where the Labour leader Trembath had been supported by the APO in the municipal elections. The crucial 1909 conference of the APO at which the Draft Act of Union was discussed, was held in the Socialist Hall in Buitenkant Street, Cape Town.

And, when the Socialist leader Tom Mann visited South Africa in 1910 the APO backed his "vigorous appeal to all wage-earners to organise and present a united front to the power of capitalism which ever sought to enslave the wage-earner. We are pleased to see indications here and there throughout the Coloured world of the superlative need of organisation being gradually recognised by wage-earners; but in South Africa there is little evidence of any such desirable lesson being learnt.

"Instead of that, we notice increasing tokens of division, distinct sectional hatred and antagonism. Added to all the ignorance that prevails amongst even skilled white artisans as to the necessity for integrating all their unions, there is a strong prejudice against their Coloured co-workers. . . It is time that the white labour leaders told their rank and file that the driving of white and Coloured people into separate kraals will play into the hands of their enslavers."

Who was South Africa's first prominent Non-European Socialist? Almost certainly Dr. Abdurahmna.

In October 1911 a white Socialist, Arthur Noon, addressed an APO meeting on "Socialism and the Native Question" and the "APO" reports Dr. Abdurahman's contribution to the discussion as follows:

"As a public man he could not help being Socialist, for all men who read and thought and endeavoured to improve the position of the lower classes of society were inevitably driven to Socialism. The condition of the working man today seemed to him to be worse than that of a slave, for the Coloured workman was not only virtually a slave of the capitalist, but had in addition to look after himself, whereas the health and condition of the slave was always a matter of serious concern to the master. Yet the workmen had in their hands the best possible weapon for bettering their condition, viz: co-operation. With co-operation the Native and Coloured labourers of South Africa could bring the white capitalists to their knees within 48 hours."

But although the conditions existed for the establishment at this early stage of close links between the national movement and the most militant white socialists, the white socialists failed badly.

From the Transvaal white Labour Party came a blast of the most vile racialism in no way distinguishable from modern Nationalist Party propaganda. Instead of turning from this in disgust and seeing that no party whose spokesman utilised the crudest racialism could have anything in common with Socialism, those who were opposed to racialism decided to remain loyal to the Labour

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Party.

The close relations developing between white Socialists and the Non-European liberatory organisations disappeared overnight with the decision of white Labour throughout the new Union to follow the leadership of Transvaal Labour and accept its colour bar policies in the first general election of 1910.

Labour won no Cape seats in the election and Maginess, the President of the Cape Labour Party, complained bitterly at an APO meeting the following year: "It was largely due to their President (Dr. Abdurahman) the the Labour Party of that Province was unrepresented in the Union Parliament."

This APO meeting revealed that there were those present who had a far deeper understanding than Maginess. The Coloured workers mocked Maginess's praise for Smuts with whom Labour was in alliance, and explained to him that Smuts was by nature a capitalist. Dr. Abdurahman summed up his feelings in the words "the whole Labour party and the white workers on the Rand are about the most selfish lot I have heard of." (Applause). 24